





“Results not achieved,” continued from page 2

ourselves, other than just being a “voice against the austerity measures.” We were to use our seats as tribunes to build a movement among people outside the parliament. We did not fool ourselves nor did we tell anyone that us getting elected would in itself change anything.

The aim was to bring people together, organizing around a common cause (defensive action against the social-welfare cuts), and, through this, collective conclusions were to be drawn. Taking part in elections and parliament was a means to an end, not the end, at least that’s what we told ourselves. The end was nothing less than reconstituting a socialist labor movement in the whole of the country. City council was just a small step towards that goal. We wanted to use it to bring out our ideas to more people and raise consciousness through principled confrontation with our political opponents. So we did, we did so very much and got kind of good at it, but we were never able to act as midwives to our planned movement — not in the working class and not in any other class either.

A document that became a must-read for people joining our organization was the Second International radical (and later council communist) Anton Pannekoek’s *Tactical Differences in the Labor Movement* (1909).<sup>4</sup> In my translation:

Social reforms are clearly not, as often posed, stages on our way towards our goal in that sense that the end goal is an uninterrupted series of such reforms. We fight to win measures which not at all means partly achieving what we want to realize in the socialist form of society. . . . But winning social reforms is stages on our path to our goal in that sense, that it brings with it an increase of our power. Only as such, as an increase of our power, does it have any value for socialism.

What Pannekoek was describing here was how social politics was to be fought over (by the still ascending labor movement) to increase the movement’s power. The foundations of the power of the workers’ movement was, according to Pannekoek, three-folded. First and foremost in the *economic functions* and role of the working class as the carrier of the whole social structure. Secondly, organizations make use of that role for the purposes of the proletariat. And thirdly *class consciousnesses*: understanding of the world and which horizons are within reach. The increasing or shrinking of this class power would then be the scale according to which activities could be measured.

Pannekoek also gave explicit purpose (in the same pamphlet) to socialists taking part in parliament: not to achieve victories but to fight the political opponents of the proletarian socialist movement. Victory could only be a deeper understanding among workers of the limits of democracy. It all makes sense from a strategic orientation around increasing the power of the working class.

Besides perspectives on social reforms and purposes of taking part in parliamentarism, Pannekoek also wrote about the role of labor unions, as the most basic form of the organized workers’ movement. If anyone would set out to read the first program of the Socialists from 2008, which also is the basis of the current one, in light of Pannekoek’s pamphlet, the source of inspiration is easy to identify.

What never struck our minds though, not until several years later, is that perhaps the working class forming the seemingly unstoppable Second International of 1909, was not the same subject for social change as our youth, semi-subcultural organization. Were we really the same? Raising a question like that today, it’s hard not to laugh, but that little piece of the puzzle passed us by.

If mixing up the subjects (the workers’ movement of 1909 and us in the 2000s) made us not deal with working-class politics at all, perhaps not even distantly related, what about Left populism? Even then, it can’t be considered much more than a failure. We did not succeed in setting people into any lasting motion. Grievances flared up many times, we led some protests and gave support to others. Examples of this are closures of rural schools, parents protesting against cuts in childcare, and nursing staff protesting against cuts in health- and elder care. Contacts and trust were gained but no lasting activities were sustained. If our aim in “creating a movement” (our attempt of linking the small questions to grander horizons) was to make us socialists, then the failing of this attempt made us mere populists, but without much of a populist movement. We tried to be the former, but in failing that we sort of became the latter, but not very successful measured in that aspect either, since we could not stop trying to be the former.

**Attempting to break out of isolation**

We have always been very much aware of our own limitations due to our geographical isolation. Early on we sought to build up chapters in nearby cities. In 2010 we made our first attempt of “going national” after having made contacts with former black-bloc anti-fascists who also wanted to “go political.” There were also members from Västervik who had moved away to other cities for work or study. We imagined that our little Västervik could be a red base area from which we could lob out satellites in Sweden.

New chapters were formed in more cities, a new city-council seat was taken in a nearby small municipality, but none of these chapters survived for very long. The direct, non-political surface reasons for this were primarily two.

1. We were all still quite young and it is easier to be radical before one needs to consider the

imperatives of earning a living or providing for a family. Very few want to continue being an “activist” their whole life, and being a Leftist activist was indeed all we had to offer people.

2. Our organization as such was not really capable (or competent) in helping new comrades around the country to run their stuff. We were not ready for the task from the end of the red base area either.

After 2015, Västervik was yet again alone. Most of the new members were still around but only Västervik kept going, itself too busy to reflect properly, if at all.

In 2019 it was time for the other of the two typical 70s Left groups to splinter. This time the delight had come not to Trotskyites but rather 1928-style Stalinists in the KPML(r)/KP.<sup>5</sup> Their breakup differed in many ways from our break with the SP, not just in time, but especially in that the Stalinist splinters tried to change their party, while we just wanted to leave and distance ourselves. They represented a new generation coming from the youth league, wanting to get rid of the hammer and sickle as a party symbol, perhaps tuning down party siblingship with the North Korean Workers Party, distancing themselves from Stalin, etc. Also in the mix was the Party’s stance on open borders and mass immigration, the rise of the populist Right was not even possible to deny for the “R:ers.” They kept the fight going for a while and the typical bad-blood, dirty-Lefty-break-up happened on several locations around the country.

After their bad breakup, people went in different directions. In Malmö, Sweden’s third largest city in the very south, the chapter went in the direction of what I call “pure populism” and formed the Malmö-list (Malmölistan). The pure populism camp is formed with inspiration from and around the local party Örebropartiet, in the city of Örebro. They have strongly leaned into nationalism and have done an “updated class analysis” with the “transferiat” (those who live on transfers from the public sector in one way or another) as center characters. Class conflict today is, according to their “real Marxism,” between the productive classes and this transferiat. They (both Örebropartiet and Malmölistan) have sought to bring out their message, in the social media channels of the nationalist Right, which have gladly taken them in.

A little further up north in Sweden in county Dalarna (only really the middle though) the majority of the local KP-chapter restarted as the Dalarna Socialist Association. This organization later merged with the Socialists in 2021 and this was the beginning of our second attempt of breaking isolation. More on this later.

A third formation took place after the rumble in the 70s Stalinist camp, and that was the formation called “24:7” in the city of Varberg. 24:7 describes themselves as a “hybrid between a party and popular movement,” and took the name “24:7” because they are active 24 hours, 7 days a week. 24:7 can probably best be described as something in between Malmölistan and Dalarnas Socialist Association, in that they only got rid of the communist aesthetics and want to “create movement” around “concrete questions” — indeed similar thoughts to those we used to justify our break from the SP, some 11 years earlier. In the last elections of September 2022, 24:7 succeeded in gaining seats in Varberg, something they had never accomplished before, as communists. Malmölistan did not succeed, despite hard work, and the pure populists in Örebropartiet had their best election this far. So did several other local parties/populist initiatives around the country.

**The 2022 elections for the socialists**

With the merging with Dalarnas Socialist Association we hoped, for the second time, to become a national Left alternative. The comrades in the Dalarna chapter had, in the election of 2018, gained seats in Ludvika city council, then still with the communists. The plan now was to regain that seat with the new Party. We thought it to be a relatively easy task, now that the comrades wouldn’t have to defend either Stalin or North Korea. The chapter’s local leader was also kind of a radical political celebrity.

The plan was soon turned into gravel though, when the same leading figure moved to another city, not in the county of Dalarna. The organization was not strong enough to live and thrive without their leading figure. Instead the chapter in Dalarna decided to run in the very small municipality of Älvdalen.

Besides running with independent candidature lists in Älvdalen and Västervik, we also ran in the municipalities of Gotland and Uppsala (where a local chapter had been started after a member of Uppsala city council jumped from the Left Party<sup>6</sup> to us, just before Dalarna joined in). We also ran in the national election for the first time in 2022, totally devoid of any illusions, just because we did not want to lend any support to the Social Democrats<sup>7</sup> or the Left Party any more.

I decided to run on Gotland as a last (perhaps rather desperate) attempt to still move the project forward, even though, by this time, I had strong objections to where we were going in relation to what we claimed we wanted to achieve. I had just moved to the island from Västervik in the late summer of 2021. I had then no plans of setting up shop, but instead wanted to focus on unionizing my workplace and help out in the national campaign.

When the prospects of the second attempt of “going national” soon started to look less promising, I decided to give the anti-austerity Left-wing populism a chance on Gotland. Cuts in



Anton Pannekoek

the public welfare systems were as ever present on Gotland as anywhere else in Sweden. The candidature was presented six months before the election. So how did things go?

In the heartland, Västervik, we lost one seat and went from three to two — this mostly due to the fact that our organizational capacity had shrunken, with myself moving away (after being the central figure since the start in 2003) and no mobilized support for Västervik from other chapters in the country. In Uppsala (which is Sweden’s fourth biggest city) we did not make it, same as in Älvdalen with our new ex-R:ers comrades. On Gotland we only got half way in our six months of rather intense campaigning. We got 430 votes of approximately 800 needed for one seat in the local parliament. The results in the national election reflected our isolation with only a bit over 800 votes (compared to some 1500 local votes of which 1289 was in Västervik and Gotland).

In my mind, this election meant the closing of our last chance of keeping up the Left populist project we had become without really seeking it. New seats in new locations was a necessity for being able to attain any sort of force of gravity. A little momentum, however small, was preciously needed.

**Left populism has a very limited (if any at all) potential to bring forward the case for socialism**

It is now, after 20 years of failed strategy in Västervik and two failed attempts of breaking isolation, high time to draw conclusions and critically evaluate the time that has passed. The alternatives to rethinking are only two, none of which is good enough. We can of course close shop and forget about those “silly days of youthful attempts of changing the world.” We can also continue on, keeping a blind eye to everything that speaks against the connection between what we are doing and what we want to do. Surely that would mean that the next 20 years would become a worse repetition of the years that have passed.

Instead of the local parliamentary seats serving as means to stimulate and “help create” civil-social movements amongst people against the austerity politics, we ended up helping people in Västervik tell themselves that they indeed had “done something” to change the world — when they voted for us. Sure, local political life has been kind of pressed, and sometimes a bit more pressed for two decades thanks to the Socialists, but that was never the aim. The aim was to build and increase class power by people in motion.

Without noticing ourselves, all we did, all we were (and what we now are) was shaped in relation to the lowest floor of the political pyramid structure of the Swedish state. We got caught up in the machine, so to speak. Hundreds of people have passed through the organization over the years. In times of elections we have been a strong, all-volunteer activist campaign force. Between elections, however, people have tended to drift away. Local anti-austerity politics was never, at least not for us, in our sincere attempts, the powder keg we had hoped. Winning votes against austerity politics on a general civic mandate is in no way a step forward in a project for achieving socialism. At least not if one means by “achieving socialism” realizing the transitional form between capitalism and socialism.

In our “very Marxist” program we speak about unions, workers, the working class, women in the working class, and class conflict as what defines the world we live in. Between 2006 and 2011 we had influence on union activities in wood manufacturing plants. Those were years of very good lessons learnt in factory organizing and, to my understanding, also proof of potential in the “actual” working class. This work was half-broken with the 2009 global recession but kept going until the last plant, where we had influence, was shut down in 2011. Instead of really evaluating these experiences back then, we got sucked into more city-council stuff. Union activities were engaged more after that, but never worked consistently and in the light of the experiences made. It was, so to speak, only done with the left hand.

Today I can’t help thinking that we should have instead evaluated our strategy back in 2010 and perhaps shifted towards trying to be a practical school for shop-floor organizing, and in that at least build foundations in the working class. The Owl of Minerva is said to only fly at dusk. It does not correspond well to us. It obviously had to pass to pitch black night before we started to think

critically about what we were doing, and that night is now.

Instead we continued on for 13 more years, our “sell” to people who came to us was that they might become activists and perhaps read a little Marx, some Ernest Mandel, some Pannekoek and perhaps a book or two more if someone wanted to go “deep.” Guess what — most normal people don’t like being activists, and, if reading has no real connection to anything existing, then reading is rarely motivated either.

**What we failed to grasp**

Implicit in how we have written our programs and found inspiration amongst the Second International radicals, is that there is a Left that exists, that it is somehow the same thing now as then, and that it is just not good enough. We saw that the Left had been Stalinist, social democratic, middle-class dominated from 1968 onwards, and totally degenerated with postmodernism in our days. Besides that, we thought we only had to not be bad like “all the others,” and things would be great. We never posed the question like this, but today it looks like we thought that overcoming a hundred-year long process of the eradication of class consciousness was to be somehow circumvented only if we were active enough. We thought that distancing ourselves from the stinking corpse of the Left would overcome the death of the Left.

Our “socialist” horizons also shrunk, of course. Nostalgia over the “good old days” of the welfare state in the 1980s is not much of a program for the future. In our program we wrote about socialism in terms of moving forward, freedom, overcoming class society and wage labor. But what we then raised as political demands and “solutions” were only things from a glorified past: recreation, building back, re-nationalization, and re-stateification. The horizons of the future shrunk to that of yesterday, and yesterday — no matter what one thinks of it — was surely no socialism.

So what about the future?

I don’t know much more than that I still want to contribute to the answer of the freedom question, and so do my comrades. Now we have heard that there are some strange people calling themselves Platypus, who not only claim that the “Left is dead” (which is hard even for us to argue against now), but also says “Long live the Left.” The “long live” part seems to imply that the freedom question isn’t fully doomed, never to be raised again. You also claim that most of our “Marxist” truths are actually false, that the contradiction between labor and capital is not between the actual classes, that Marx himself did not write *Das Kapital* to give the working class a better understanding of how the world works (even not about economics at all), to mention a few. The questions you pose tasks us to investigate and seek better understanding. Before that is done, I feel like I have no right to speak at all. If we can gain some understanding from listening closer to what you have to say, that might be as good a point for a new start as there can be — whatever that will entail.

See you in Chicago! **IP**

<sup>1</sup> Västervik is a small deindustrialized town on the southeast coast of Sweden.

<sup>2</sup> Gymnasium in Sweden comprises years 10–12 of the Swedish school system and the first level that is formally not mandatory.

<sup>3</sup> Västerviks Socialistförening, which, in elections, runs under the name Socialisterna Valfärdspartiet (Socialist Welfare Party). Here it will be referred to as the Socialists.

<sup>4</sup> *Die Taktischen Differenzen in der Arbeiterbewegung.*

<sup>5</sup> Communist Party Marxist-Leninist (revolutionaries), later simply Communist Party, also known as the R:ers.

<sup>6</sup> Vänsterpartiet.

<sup>7</sup> Socialdemokraterna.



# The vicissitudes of the Green New Deal

Andony Melathopoulos and Charis Theodorou

On October 22, 2022, *Platypus Affiliated Society* members Andony Melathopoulos and Charis Theodorou gave the following edited article as a teach-in, the video of which is available online at <<https://youtu.be/e1hsiSuwg8s>>.

**THE GREEN NEW DEAL** arose just months after Democrats retook Congress in the 2018 midterms. In fact, two days after the midterms the Sunrise Movement staged a sit-in at the office of Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, signalling the clear strategy to pressure Democrats to enact climate-change policies under the slogan, “decarbonization, jobs, and justice.” Shortly thereafter, newly elected “Squad” member Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, along with Senator Ed Markey introduced a bill for the Green New Deal, calling for a public-works program akin to Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal in the 1930s, to not only rebuild the welfare state that had been unwound since the 1980s, but to do so in a way that significantly reduced carbon emissions. Although non-binding, Pelosi didn’t allow a vote on the Bill in Congress, and it was only brought to the floor of the Senate by Mitch McConnell who wanted to get Senate Democrats on record. At the end of the day, no Senators voted in favor, with most Democrats ducking the challenge by voting “present” and / or joining Republicans to vote against. In spite of the political defeat, the Millennial Left still hoped the Green New Deal would coalesce the elements of the Democratic Party machinery — the unions, NGOs, and ethnic constituencies — around Bernie Sanders as the next presidential nominee. Undeterred, they created posters in the style of the 1930s Federal Art Program, depicting not dams and bridges, but new high-speed rail, with wind turbines whirring in the distance. They hoped their efforts would be redeemed by Bernie in 2020, not remembering how in 2016 the very constituencies they hoped to capture with the iconography of the Green New Deal, were what enabled Hillary Clinton to win the nomination in 2016.

The Millennial’s “socialist” visions of the future / past came up against the realities of the present. It turned out that Sanders was apparently not serious about winning the Democratic nomination, bowing out quickly and vowing to pressure the Democrats, rather than lead them. As Pelosi herself chided, the “Squad” had underestimated the Democratic Party machine, pointing out that their four votes were only that, that they “didn’t have any following”<sup>1</sup> — meaning the grassroots of the Democratic Party was not with them — no matter how large their Twitter following was. And Pelosi was not wrong as it was ultimately the conservative grassroots of the Party who grew wary of the easy target the “Squad” offered to a Republican Party. A Republican Party that seemed not only to survive but grew emboldened by the string of special inquiries from Russian collusion to the events of January 6. With Biden’s election, even the pretence of the “Squad” pressuring the administration has fallen away, as the Millennials have resigned their fate to the Democratic Party. As hecklers at a recent event in Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez’s own district relentlessly pointed out, the “Squad” no longer functions as a loyal opposition, but simply approves bills for higher military spending.<sup>2</sup> By the time all elements of President Biden’s infrastructure program rolled out, it looked nothing like the posters. While one senior Sunrise Movement leader claimed victory, declaring the Green New Deal had ushered in an “era of big government is back,”<sup>3</sup> the claim rang hollow in terms of the broader ambitions the Millennials began with. What the Millennials had wrought was not utopia, but fraud.

Notably, the Green New Deal — the idea of creating a new political machine by joining organized labor to the environmental movement

— is not a new idea. As Green Party presidential candidate Howie Hawkins repeatedly points out, the Green New Deal was part of his campaigns for U.S. Representative as far back as 2000. In fact, he suggests that the notion of “large-scale public investment in clean energy for jobs and economic justice as well as environmental protection”<sup>4</sup> dates back to his opposition to President Richard Nixon’s “Project Independence” to build 1,000 nuclear plants by 2000, in the depths of the 1970s energy crisis. Hawkins was part of a group that was able to bring together environmental activists and members of the Oil, Chemical, and Atomic Workers to oppose Nixon’s plans. Notably, unlike the Millennial generation, the New Left did form new political organizations across the world in the 1980s in the form of Green Parties, the most powerful being in Germany. The German Green Party also played an important role in decommissioning nuclear power plants when it formed a coalition with social democrats at the end of 1990s, winning a Nuclear Exit Law that auspiciously resulted in the closure of all German nuclear plants the year before the current energy crisis in Europe.

But as Hawkins points out, the effort to build the U.S. Green Party was done with an awareness of the trap of working in the Democratic Party.<sup>5</sup> He equates the problem extending back to the original 1930s New Deal, when Communists went into coalition with the Democratic Party against fascism, in what is known as the Popular Front. As he argues:

since 1848 the traditional principle of socialist politics was class independence from the capitalists. The so-called “socialists” in this country have forgotten that. They don’t know that they’re continuing the Popular Front because they don’t study history. And when you’re in a Popular Front with the Democrats, you are the junior partner: they set the agenda, and you go out and knock on doors or make phone calls. You’re not a Left anymore; you’re just grunt workers for the corporate liberals and neoliberals.<sup>6</sup>

Hawkins was part of a group of socialists in the late 1970s and early 80s who looked to discontent around environmental degradation to create the basis for a new independent Left. The strategy could be characterized as forging a new political coalition after the era of the socialist parties had passed, *a politics of survival*, that could regroup the labor movement around emerging environmental concerns and defeat the political machinery that Hawkins identified as the key obstacle to socialism.

Hawkins was influenced by a key political figure in the U.S. Left in the late 1970s and early 80s, Barry Commoner. Hawkins joined Commoner’s Citizen Party in 1980 for Commoner’s presidential campaign. Commoner, however, provides an instructive example of the limitations of the politics of survival.

Commoner was a protagonist of the early environmental movement in the 70s. A generation older than Hawkins, he became a vocal critic of the neo-Malthusian positions taken up by scientists like Paul Erlich. As opposed to their contention that limited resources and growing population were the primary source of pollution and environmental degradation, Commoner emphasized class and national interests. He claimed that capitalist profitability was a fetter on technological changes and policies that would enable humanity to reduce pollution and develop technologies that could transform limited resources into abundance. Like Hawkins, he expected a struggle over who would pay the costs of the pollution, a struggle along class lines. Workers, Commoner believed, were disproportionately the bearers of the effects of pollution, while the capitalists benefited from reduced costs associated with their pollution leaving their plants untreated. He concluded that this situation generated the basis for an environmental politics of the working class: “neither worker nor environmentalist can reach their separate goals without joining in a common one: to reconstruct the nation’s productive system so that it conforms to the imperatives of the environment which supports it, meets the needs of the workers who operate it, and secures the future of the people who have built it.”<sup>7</sup>

Undoubtedly, discontent among workers with environmental degradation has persisted to this day. What failed to materialize is not only any widespread militant opposition, but any challenge to the enduring political organizations of the mid-to-late 20<sup>th</sup> century. In fact, today, working-class people are more likely to oppose environmental regulation as it tends to increase costs to workers and reduce the profitability of the firms they work for. On environmental questions, working people around the world may, in fact, be more closely aligned with the position of capitalists than those of would-be socialists. Why is this?

The 1960s New Left not only gave rise to attempts at alternative political organizations, like Commoner’s Citizen Party, but also critics of the New Left’s failure to deal with deeper problems faced by the previous generation, the 1930s Old Left. Andrew Feenberg took up Commoner’s approach to environmental politics and the Left in his 1978 essay, “Beyond the Politics of Survival.”<sup>8</sup>

Feenberg points out Commoner’s position

treats the working class in entirely objective terms, a position that was considered in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century as “vulgar” Marxism. Vulgar in what sense? Vulgar in that it treats the working-class consciousness of the aims of its movement as static and unchanging, or as Cliff Slaughter puts it in his essay on revolutionary leadership, “political events and tendencies are seen as ‘natural’ and inescapable reflections of economic interest.”<sup>9</sup> Contra Commoner, Feenberg points out, labor’s situation regarding the environment is ambiguous: “It can resist the unequal burden that it bears by resisting all expenditures for restoration of the environment, short-sighted though this policy may be. Or, it can fight to insure that the burden is more fairly shared, while struggling to improve the conditions under which it works and lives.”<sup>10</sup> Feenberg’s point being that the working class, in its immediate situation, does not lead beyond capitalist politics; that specific interest of workers in socialism cannot be understood on strictly objective terms. Socialist politics would have to arise from workers understanding their role in history. Like the 1930s Old Left before them, Hawkins, and Commoner, could only relate to the working class as a constituency, an interest group with positive objective interests. This is unlike the socialism before the 1930s and its Popular Front, who would have regarded the opposition between profits and the damaging effects of pollution — the needs of capital and the needs of labor — as expressing a contradiction of society in capitalism, which the socialist labor movement would bring to its fullest expression in its political life.

In contrast to socialism, progressivism looked to manage the contradictory aspects of society by attempting to have capital serve the middle classes. The conflict between labor and capital, which held the promise of rendering this contradiction politically tractable, was occluded with an attempt to merge two features of society that are at odds: the ceaseless motion of capital and the conservatism of the middle class towards this motion. Middle-class discontents become the basis of reorganizing capital accumulation. But the effort of staving off the recurrent crises, by kicking the can down the road, ultimately maintains capitalism through its manifest social and political crises. The liquidation of the workers’ movement for socialism left the political leadership to the capitalist parties under the progressive banner, which after the 1930s was primarily led through the Democratic Party. What remained was not politics, but a constantly shifting struggle among capitalists and middle-class constituencies to restabilize society. Whereas the working class once understood itself as the active cause of crises in capitalism, and in turn, the basis of advancing these crises politically, as the 20<sup>th</sup> century wore on, it entered crises passively, watching as various groups fought and jockeyed to bring about a new social alliance of capital. In this way, the Green Parties of the 1980s, while attempting to become independent of the main capitalist parties, did so in a way that simply conceded the progressive approach to politics.

In the current wave of Green New Dealers, the aims of the working class in socialism are completely obscure. Moreover, unlike Commoner and Hawkins, they seem to lack any sense of the extent to which the Democratic Party poses an obstacle to this end. They look to the Democratic Party to put capital to work to meet the middle-class reaction against environmental degradation. The working class, or more specifically the unions which constitute a cog in the Democratic Party machine, are considered the tool for winning such negotiations within the Party. This is taken to be socialism.

An illustration of this confusion came in the closing act of the Green New Deal, as the Inflation Reduction Act was passed in August. To mark the significance of the Democrats complete absorption of the Millennial’s aspirations into the Party, Haymarket Books and Verso Books hosted a “debate” on eco-socialist “futures.”<sup>11</sup> During the debate DSA<sup>12</sup> Green New Dealer Matthew Huber was confronted by degrowth proponent Andrea Vetter over the supposed progress of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Vetter, who ended the debate by stating that she drew hope for the future in people raising their own chickens, chided Huber for his reading of the 20<sup>th</sup> century progressive movements, his faith in the working class, and his “Marxism.” Wasn’t this history just one of catastrophe and the gains simply of “male, working class, mostly white,” who “gained a lot over the past 50 years in the global north from all this injustice”? Vetter questioned whether Marxism wasn’t simply, at worst, the ideology of a particular interest at the expense of humanity and, at best, only adequate to the age of capitalism, but not the old oppressions of patriarchy and colonialism.

Huber’s defence of the working class and Marxism against Vetter’s attacks reflect a further degradation of the problem that Feenberg already identified with Commoner. Huber points to the enormous technological progress and narrowing of income inequality since the 1930s New Deal and that the working class was the key constituency associated with bringing about that world. And, he continues, of course Marxists are concerned with colonialism as well as patriarchy, given their role in decolonization after WWII and the 1960s sexual revolution.

But what Huber is ultimately referring to is not the role of the working class in socialism, but the liquidation of the working-class organizations for socialism beginning in the 1930s into progressivism, of which the Democratic Party

was key, particularly in post-WWII reconstruction. With the loss of socialism, the working class increasingly found itself divided, first in terms of the workers who organized into unions or not, then, into constituencies based on nationality, religion, race, gender, and sexuality. As Chris Cutrone states: “Today in the U.S., it seems to matter more whether one lives in a ‘red or blue state,’ or what one’s ‘race, gender, and sexuality’ are, than if one is a worker or a capitalist — whatever that might mean. Cultural affinities seem to matter more than socioeconomic interests, as the latter burn. People cling to their chains as the only things they know how.”<sup>13</sup> Like all Green New Dealers, Huber casts his future back into the 1930s, to a time when the working class could still understand itself as such, on its path to disillusionment into the New Deal. Huber assumes a kind of working class — as a coherent socioeconomic group — that no longer even identifies as such in even an early progressive sense. That one cannot even talk about a “working-class culture” as one might in Commoner’s moment, marks a regression that Huber glosses. It is for this reason that Commoner, although wary of the dangers of the Democratic Party in ways that Huber’s generation seemed incapable of, could ultimately not think outside the New Deal framework of the working class as an object. These moments of regression — a product first of the liquidation of socialism by progressivism and then fragmentation of class altogether — would have to be recognized.

Feenberg diagnosed the environmental politics of the 1970s as a product of the loss of the subjective quality of working-class politics. As he instructively points out: “The human species is not yet the subject of the struggle to survive, and so this struggle itself becomes a facet of the contradictory impulses of the very class and national struggles the obsolescence of which it demonstrates.”<sup>14</sup> What does Feenberg mean that humans have not yet become the subject of the struggle to survive? And what does he mean in saying that in assuming we are subjects, we only worsen the recurrent crises of the past?

Marx, unlike Vetter, did not view capitalism as simply another stage in history, just the latest form of oppression, in a long line of oppressions, but as the opportunity for humanity to become free, for the first time. Marx understood capitalism as the crisis of bourgeois freedom comprehended by Hegel as a dialectic of labor; the understanding that subjects recognize themselves through their labor. Along these lines, labor is not as Huber assumes, just a static fact of contemporary life, but an expression of the crisis that poses the problem of freedom. The contradictory character of labor, which confronts us as capital, obscures how we, the subjects, participate in the social reality around us, but also promises its overcoming through socialism. Rather than the progressive approach that everyone on the Left today accepts and has naturalized, socialism would not attempt to manage capitalism on the basis of its middle-class discontents, but turn the problem of capitalism into something that society could overcome subjectively. Marxism, then, is not as Vetter imagines, apologetics for working-class interests, but something entirely different. It is the attempt to locate the potential for change and transformation through an immanent critique of the society on the basis of its own self-understanding. By manifesting the crisis of society in capitalism, the working class would no longer be an object *[a class in itself]* but become the subject of transforming society *[a class for itself]*. **JP**

<sup>1</sup> Maureen Dowd, “It’s Nancy Pelosi’s Parade,” *New York Times*, July 6, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Valentina Jarmillo and Rich Calder, “Protesters heckle AOC with song over her support for aiding Ukraine,” *New York Post*, January 21, 2023, available online at <<https://nypost.com/2023/01/21/protestors-heckle-aoc-with-song-over-ukraine-aid-support/>>.

<sup>3</sup> See Matthew Miles Goodrich, “We can thank Green New Dealers for the inflation reduction act,” *The Nation*, August 17, 2022, available online at <<https://www.thenation.com/article/environment/thank-green-new-deal-inflation-reduction-act/>>.

<sup>4</sup> See Howie Hawkins and Gloria Mattera, “The Original Green New Dealers,” available online at <[https://www.hawkinsmatters.org/the\\_original\\_green\\_new\\_dealers](https://www.hawkinsmatters.org/the_original_green_new_dealers)>.

<sup>5</sup> Gregor Baszak, “‘The Democrats are worthless’: An interview with Howie Hawkins,” *Platypus Review* 126 (May 2020), available online at <<https://platypus1917.org/2020/05/01/the-democrats-are-worthless-an-interview-with-howie-hawkins/>>.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Barry Commoner, “Address Before the Annual Convention: United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America” (September 12, 1972), New York, mimeo, 1.

<sup>8</sup> Andrew Feenberg, “Beyond the Politics of Survival,” *Theory and Society* 7, no. 3 (May 1979): 319–61.

<sup>9</sup> Cliff Slaughter, “What is Revolutionary Leadership?,” *Labour Review* 5, no. 3 (October–November 1960): 93–96, 105–11, available online at <<https://www.marxists.org/history/eto/writers/slaughter/1960/10/leadership.html>>.

<sup>10</sup> Feenberg, “Beyond the Politics of Survival.”

<sup>11</sup> Streamed on August 2, 2022, available online at <[https://www.youtube.com/live/9MNwY\\_6X1Zl](https://www.youtube.com/live/9MNwY_6X1Zl)>.

<sup>12</sup> Democratic Socialists of America.

<sup>13</sup> Chris Cutrone, “Class consciousness [from a Marxist perspective] today,” *Platypus Review* 51 (November 2012), available online at <<https://platypus1917.org/2012/11/01/class-consciousness-from-a-marxist-perspective-today/>>.

<sup>14</sup> Feenberg, “Beyond the Politics of Survival.”



U.S. Senator Alexandria Ocasio Cortez of the “Squad”



“You don’t need a revolution,” continued from page 1

mystification. Marx isn’t the only person who thought that was important. It is also worth remembering, as Marx says in the *Communist Manifesto* (1848), that the globalization of capitalism produced enormous benefits for many people and was a superior mode of production to feudalism. But it reached a point where it had created this class division that was inhumane and needed to be overcome. We’re looking at that now. Wealth gaps are a global problem. Is it going to bite us in the ass before we do something about it? Marx was not alone in thinking that, but it’s one of the things that he thought a lot about. Why do people suffer where there is affluence? It’s hard to explain, and it shouldn’t be that way, but it is. Is it that way endemically? Is it the way the economic system that we have must function, and is it something that can be fixed without just blowing everything up? A lot of people in the world think we have to blow it all up right now. They are not progressive people — they are reactionaries.

**CPM:** What do you think is required to make people conscious of their position in society?

**LM:** We’re talking about it, and people will listen to us. One thing we lack is leadership on the progressive side. There are figures out there, but they’re not transcendent leaders. You know when transcendent leaders come along. They’re not just doing it by themselves, and they articulate their position in a way that doesn’t sound partisan. People believe it: “yes, this is the way we should go.” Then you get votes, which gets you control of the legislative branch, and you can pass laws. We’re not passing any laws right now. We’re in the hands of the executive branch and the courts. That’s not very democratic. It is hard to just say, “get enlightened by your politics,” because most people don’t think about politics in the way that you and I do, who are basically ideologues. Most people respond to other things, and you want to give them a reason to feel they have a stake in a certain kind of social change so they’ll support it. But if they feel that the changes you’re proposing are going to benefit somebody who is not like them, which is currently what a lot of voters think, you’re not going to get very far. No white evangelical gun-owner thinks Elizabeth Warren is going to be on his or her side, and they’re not wrong. You need somebody who persuades you, saying, “what I’m gonna do is gonna be good for you, and it’s not gonna hurt.” Right now, the Democratic Party doesn’t have people like that. Neither does the Republican Party. That’s why it’s so divisive.

**CPM:** There’s a point in your foreword where you’re quoting Wilson quoting Trotsky, where Trotsky is denouncing the Mensheviks, that they’ve been “thrown in the trash bin of history,” but Wilson says that sometimes things must be retrieved from this trash bin. Would you say from the standpoint of 2020 that Marxism is something worth pulling from the trash bin of history?

**LM:** Yes, definitely. But the idea that Marx and all these socialist thinkers had in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was that they understood the law of history. That assumption is not worth salvaging. There is no law of history. That is just a dream they had. But if you read the Communist Manifesto now, it is incredibly relevant today. It’s all about the division between the rich and the poor, about the crisis of neoliberal capitalism. Much of what Marx saw is what we still see in the economic world that we live in. The whole idea about the dialectic, and the inevitable coming of the classless society—that is not worth resurrecting.

**CPM:** What do you think would be necessary for Marxism to be successful in a revolutionary context today?

**LM:** I don’t see how you could possibly have a classless society, so if that’s a goal, then I don’t know. We could get a more equitable society — we *should* get a more equitable society. But you’re not going to get communism, the abolition of private property, an end to the division of labor. I don’t see that. But that shouldn’t be the issue right now. The issue should be equity in the distribution of wealth. You don’t need a revolution for that. You just need congress.

**CPM:** Is there work to be done beyond just creating equity in society? Mere “equity in society” seems to be something that the bourgeois revolutions and the first Enlightenment promised. If equity is the goal, then what is the relevance of Marxism today?

**LM:** Marx saw that capitalism produces a certain kind of class structure that it reifies as natural and inevitable. It’s inevitable that there’ll be poor people and wealthy people. It’s inevitable that there’ll be property owners and people that sell their labor to the property owners. Marx says that is all an illusion; it’s just fake. We make it up and we believe in it, and we think we can’t change it. That’s the view of all radical thought: that you *can* change it. We could change the tax system right now if we had a willing congress to do it, but we can’t. But it’s not like it’s impossible to do. We don’t need to *overthrow* Donald Trump. We need to un-elect him, but we don’t need to put him on a guillotine or anything. But for 19<sup>th</sup> century people, like Marx and Engels, the model of historical change was the French Revolution, which was a bloody revolution. They thought

revolutions just *are* violent: you must overthrow a whole class of people, killing a lot of them, seizing their possessions. We don’t think of revolution or change in that way anymore. It is not inevitable that change has to be violent.

**CPM:** Do you think that it could end up that way again?

**LM:** Could there be violence? Sure.

**CPM:** Do you think the current ideology is so reified that it makes change impossible and violence likely?

**LM:** That’s a complicated question. The ideology we’re talking about was more naturalized fifty years ago than it is now. If people asked, “can you change capitalism?” fifty years ago, most people would’ve said, “no that’s just the way things have to be.” That’s not true anymore. But nobody knows what things would look like if you replaced the status quo with something else. It’s just confusing right now. There’s no program of action. The Occupy Wall Street movement had no ideology. It represented some kind of protest, but it didn’t have a plan.

**CPM:** Wilson first encountered Marxism not through the press around 1917 and the Russian Revolution, but through its aftermath with Trotsky coming to America and visiting with the New York Trotskyists. Comparing Wilson’s originally very positive impression of Marxism with how you describe his 1972 introduction to his book where he shows disappointment, what was the impact of American Trotskyism on him?

**LM:** I don’t think Wilson was a Trotskyist, but his friends were, so he was in that circle. Trotsky was an alternative to Stalin, so what the New York Marxists wanted to believe was that Stalin had betrayed Marxism, and created this corrupted version of communism, which was what they called state capitalism. They also wanted to believe Trotsky was carrying the true flame of the Bolshevik Revolution in exile, that he was the prophet. There was a huge attraction to Trotsky as a totally doctrinaire Marxist thinker who was not associated with the crimes of Stalin. The American Left in the 30s was divided between Communists or fellow travelers, and Trotskyists. Trotsky, during the period he was in exile in Mexico, even before that but especially then, had a lot of American sympathy from intellectuals. Wilson doesn’t treat Trotsky well in his book, which is strange because Trotsky would’ve been a hero for most of these people. Then Trotsky gets assassinated, and World War II begins, and that whole world disappears.

**CPM:** You say Wilson never became an anti-communist though.

**LM:** No, he didn’t. He was anti-communist in the way most liberals were, but he didn’t become a neoconservative or militant anti-communist. He was an anti-interventionist.

**CPM:** Why do you think Wilson didn’t treat Trotsky himself well in the book?

**LM:** I don’t know. It’s a mystery to me. The arc of the story is that the principles of the French Revolution of 1789 were betrayed by Napoleon. This ushers in this long period in Europe of backlash and romanticism against the French Revolution. In this world in which there’s monarchical resurgence and suppression of political and democratic movements, socialist thought in hiding comes up with something that turns into Marxist theory. This catches on not in Germany, where Marx and Engels thought it would, but in Russia with Lenin. Then it becomes the basis of the Russian Revolution, but the end of Wilson’s book should therefore be that the principles of socialism were betrayed by Lenin. But it’s not. The end of the book is Lenin as the hero of the story, because he embodies the whole intellectual tradition of which he is the climax. Wilson didn’t make Trotsky the hero of the book. It’s a little odd because he makes Lenin the hero of the book, but Lenin is as bad as Stalin in many ways. In the 1972 introduction Wilson takes back a lot of the things he said about Lenin, which he should’ve known better than to say, even in 1940. Lenin used show trials, he tortured, he exterminated his enemies, he had concentration camps. Stalin was worse in certain respects, his record was longer, but Lenin was also a totalitarian dictator. The idea that Lenin embodied the true spirit of socialism and was running a classless society with state ownership of property is just false. He seized power. He may have thought, as Stalin probably thought too, that they were running the country until the country was ready for real communism. But I doubt it. He controlled the truth and defined Soviet society the way he wanted to. Stalin was a more brutal dictator and he had a longer record of atrocity, because he was dictator for much longer. The idea that Lenin was some kind of democratic hero is false. Wilson realized that later, and he probably knew that even when he was finishing the book, but he didn’t change the way he designed it. **IP**

*Edited by Ethan Linehan*

<sup>1</sup> Louis Menand, “Foreword: The Historical Romance,” in *Edmund Wilson, To the Finland Station: A Study in the Writing and Acting of History* (New York: New York Review Books, 2003).

# Results not achieved and prospects graveled

## Evaluation of the activities of the Socialists in Västervik and Sweden 2006–22

Johannes Regell



Västerviks Socialistföreningmarching in a demonstration

**Started off as a student movement**

**THE SOCIALISTS MET THE LIGHT** of day as foremost a movement amongst students of arts and media of the Västerviks<sup>1</sup> Gymnasium<sup>2</sup> in 2002–03. It was in the aftermath of the 90s anarcho, punk, and vegan movement — that still, at this time, could count relatively high numbers of youths for being a small town in Sweden. Political activities were formed around student protests against the second war in Iraq, austerity politics in the local municipality, solidarity with a public-sector workers’ strike and anti-neo-Nazi demonstrations (which still was a thing back then).

Students started reading a little Marx and history of the labor movement of Sweden and not long after that a local chapter of the Socialist Party (SP) was formed in Västervik. The SP was the last name of the Swedish section of the Fourth International. Why the SP, one might ask, and why the last name? From an early teenage “anarchist” perspective, the tiny Trotskyists can be understood as “non-Stalinist communists,” which obviously was an interesting lead. “Communists who were not happy about how it went in Russia” was “good enough,” we indeed thought, as a theoretical direction of orientation. Today they don’t exist as an independent organization anymore, but have gone up into the Left Party (former old official Communist Party of Sweden, today very much a typical middle-class-based liberal “Left” party).

This local chapter of the SP grew well and fast considering it being a marginalized Left group, and the protest activities continued on. In 2006, the first seat in the Västervik municipality council was won. What was done locally was not decided by the SP though, it was a local affair. We young activists in Västervik went by our own three-paragraph program: “For unity in the working class against fascism and racism, for everyone’s right to work, and for everyone’s right to welfare” (“welfare” here is referring to the Swedish social democratic *välfärdspolitik* which was general and universalist). In 2008 we broke with the SP to become the Västervik Socialist Association,<sup>3</sup> and for the SP that meant that their biggest chapter had moved on.

Breaking with the SP was for us an attempt at getting away from (or perhaps around) the 1970s Swedish Left. We were never romanticists for the 70s; we knew that it was their failure that had brought us to where we found ourselves. We were deeply skeptical of the glorification of third-world, national-liberation struggles; we saw them as having very little (if anything) to do with socialism and the self-emancipation of the working class. We were also critical of the 1928-style ultra-Leftism, which, according to us, had helped to strengthen social democratic hegemony rather than challenge it. In our minds the tiny Trotskyists were as guilty for this as the Stalinists. We saw them all as nothing but nostalgic sects, more interested in keeping the political identities of their youth rather than something with eyes on the present, not to mention the future. We sought our inspiration not in the Russian Revolution and Bolshevism but rather in the Swedish social democratic strand of socialism, from its early radicals and legends to their famous leaders of the class-collaborationist era. We hoped to rekindle the fire from what the labor movement was before expulsions, world wars, and permanent splits — before the separation of struggle for reforms and perspectives of revolution.

We sought to be concrete — as opposed to the SP and the rest of the Left, who we saw as all being lost in translation and would not be missed nor noticed if they closed shop. We wanted to set into motion big numbers of people for a civil-social movement against austerity politics and work-place struggle. The question of socialism was not something we spent too much time on, it was all defined negatively against capitalist reality. It was all about being concrete and thinking that without a movement that can fight and win over smaller things, no bigger things will be won either.

We were perhaps as delusional regarding what we could achieve and become as we were right about “all the others.”

**What was the “socialist” politics of the Socialists in Västervik?**

First and foremost, there was consistent opposition to all forms of austerity politics. We got elected and re-elected several times (the fifth round just started) on a negative mandate. We approached the election on a program of what not to do rather than what to do. We got voted in to vote against all cuts in the public welfare services such as schools, child- and elder care.

We also called out and attacked the local politicians from all the parties of the establishment, when they raised their own wages and used tax money as if it were indeed their own to play with.

From 2010 onwards we also took on the Sweden Democrats (the biggest populist Right-wing, nationalist party in Sweden) since this was the time of the start of their success story. We attacked the Right-wing nationalists and called them “our Taliban.” Exiled veteran revolutionaries from Iran had brought us clarity on matters of enlightenment, modernity, and the right to criticism. We did not want to tread the same sad path as the liberal Left who were helping the nationalist Right rather than challenging them. The ever so tiresome you-are-racist card had already then proven most futile. We attacked both liberal “progressive” multiculturalism and national romanticism as two sides of the same (reactionary) identity-politics coin.

We claimed that the further back in Swedish history one looks the more “Islamist-like” it seemed. Not literally Islamist of course [Sweden has been a Protestant country since 1527] and the Sweden Democrats are not in any way members of the Taliban. But what we saw in “tradition” was patriarchy, submission under authority dressed in either crown, shiny armor, or black coats. We said that we did not have our pioneers [of the socialist labor movement] sentenced to prison for writing against church authority only now to let even more reactionary clergymen have their way. We were the first Left group — fringe and established alike — to take that position, a good time before it got more “fashionable,” so to speak. This meant a clear stance against honor killings — instead of relativizing excuse-making, as in case of the liberal Left. Another example is that we opposed Islamists demands of gender segregation in the local bath. We always engaged in these questions in opposition to Right-wing nationalism, trying to give an alternative critique from the standpoint of enlightenment, rationalism, and secularism rather than Swedish culture, Christendom, or tradition — opposing them all together. We saw the tradition of the radical bourgeois enlightenment as the foundation of Marxism. This of course also made us “fascist” or “brown-red” in the eyes of the Left in general.

**A failed strategy — the idea was good, just not right**

Recently I myself and some comrades have started thinking about what we have been up to for the last 20 years, not socialist politics but rather Left populism. We did not become what we intended but something else, without us seeing it clearly first, perhaps still not fully. It also required a good dose of self-deception. The way I use the term “populism” in this text, even when it is Left-wing, is as something different from the context of a socialist workers movement. The socialist workers movement is based in the class itself, in civil society. The populist movement can gather up great support and hold powerful rallies, but its horizon of possibilities does not include the activity of the working class. It does not need the working class any more than any other social strata because it appeals to people as people, as citizens or as mere voters. Typical examples of this internationally are SYRIZA (Greece), Podemos (Spain), Bernie Sanders (U.S.), Hugo Chavez (Venezuela), and Jeremy Corbin (UK). Sure they all had their portion of working-class support, but they could as well have done without it. When there was working class support, it was just as a voter base — not an organic engine. The same could be said about us, but, of course, in a scale that is a thousand times smaller.

We ran and got elected in the local elections in 2006, 10, 14, 18, and 22 with goals set for